

Honolulu Star-Bulletin

Congress backs city's play on transit plan

Isle rail transit moves closer with \$20M in federal funds

By Crystal Kua

U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie tells the story of how painful it was for him to give back \$600 million in federal funding when the City Council voted down a tax increase in 1992 to fund rail transit for Honolulu.

Since then the federal government has been sheepish about financially supporting a rail transit project from Honolulu unless the city also showed a financial commitment in the form of a local source of funding.

But Congress apparently is not as reluctant anymore.

Approval yesterday of \$20 million by the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee for initial engineering of the project, along with a similar \$10 million appropriation by the House, is seen as an acknowledgment by Congress that Honolulu is serious this time around about transit, Abercrombie's office said.

"This is a clear statement that the federal government is committed to help solve one of the worst traffic congestion problems in the country," Abercrombie said as part of a joint statement from all four members of Hawaii's congressional delegation.

Mayor Mufi Hannemann said: "For a city like ours to be up to bat to get this kind of funding is a major accomplishment. It validates why this is a good project.

"If the federal government is willing to come forward and put money toward our preliminary engineering studies, it's great news."

A few more approvals are required before the city receives the money, said Abercrombie's spokesman, Randy Obata.

The difference this time around is the approval of the 0.5 percent general excise tax increase to fund mass transit locally, a key sign to the federal government that the city is serious about transit.

The mayor and other members of the delegation also said it hopefully will be the beginning of more funding to come for the project.

"We are poised to secure the federal funding to ensure that this vital project moves forward," Sens. Daniel Inouye and Daniel Akaka said in the joint statement.

About \$85 million is earmarked in the city's construction budget for the current fiscal year for planning and design work that includes preliminary engineering. About \$14 million is slated to come from the federal government, and the remaining \$71 million is being funded by revenues from the transit tax.

According to the budget, initial engineering work and the ongoing environmental impact studies will help to refine the transit project and will help to arrive at cost estimates, benefits and impacts.

City spokesman Bill Brennan said in an e-mail response that the city is preparing to apply for Federal Transit Administration approval to proceed to preliminary engineering. "(The) city is working with the FTA's (project management) consultant and expects to receive the FTA approval before the end of the year."

Councilman Charles Djou, a critic of the rail system, said it is great news that the congressional delegation was able to secure funding, but he says that is only a fraction of the project's cost.

"I think taxpayers have got to hold onto their pocketbooks, because while the \$20 million is nice, it doesn't come anywhere near to the \$1.2 billion that we have penciled in that the feds are going to give us, and if the feds don't pull through ... it's going to be coming from additional taxes," Djou said.